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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the challenges facing institutions in the development of online programs and classes and their delivery, as well as the provision of support for students as they proceed through these programs. The authors suggest that the principal challenge to project development is a lack of resources--human, financial, and technical--for curriculum and course development. Michigan community colleges' delivery of online courses is similar to other states'--a smorgasbord of courses is offered, but students can rarely complete an online program of study at a single college. Collaboration is one way colleges can address these challenges. In the absence of a state-wide governing authority for community colleges, Michigan's community colleges collaborated voluntarily. The Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative (MCCVLC) was developed in 1997. In fall 1999, there were 17 provider colleges, with 133 courses available, and 1,800 total enrollments. In fall 2001, there were 22 provider colleges, 453 courses, and an enrollment of 8,300. All classes are available from a single Web site, and academic and student support services are available from that site as well. The processes established by the MCCVLC are being used in the development of 15 collaborative online programs, and it is anticipated that other programs will follow. Complete programs offered online include criminal justice, network administrator, and health insurance coding/billing. (NB)

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e-Learning: Addressing the Challenges via Collaboration

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e-Learning: Addressing the Challenges via Collaboration

Colleges planning to offer online programs of study face several challenges, some related to program development, others related to program delivery, and still others related to providing support for students as they proceed through the programs.

The principal challenge associated with online program development is a lack of resources for curriculum and course development – human resources (faculty, instructional designers, technicians), financial resources, and technical resources. A quality online program requires that all the program-specific courses, all the required general education courses, and a reasonable selection of elective courses be available online. The history of online course development at Michigan community colleges has been fairly similar, where interested individual faculty from a wide variety of disciplines have transitioned some of their courses to an online format. This has resulted in each college having a smorgasbord of online courses available, but rarely are all the courses necessary to complete an online program of study available at a single college.

Colleges face similar challenges in the delivery of online programs of study. To a student, the value of an online program is diminished considerably if all the required courses aren't available on a regular basis – preferably, every semester. Faculty teaching online courses, however, are faced with multiple demands on their time; in addition to teaching online sections, they may be asked to allocate time to develop new online courses, and they most likely will have continuing responsibilities for teaching traditional

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courses. All these factors have resulted in an inability on the part of most colleges to offer enough online sections to meet student demand, and certainly the unavailability of courses may impact the ability of students to complete a program of study.

Finally, the challenges colleges face in providing academic and student support services cannot be overlooked. In many respects, online students differ little from their more traditional counterparts – they need access to library resources, academic advising, financial aid, tutoring and other support services. In addition, some online courses require proctored testing as a component of course assessment.

Addressing the Challenges

Many colleges have recognized that one way each of the challenges above can be addressed effectively and efficiently is through collaboration. As Michigan community colleges began to consider the possibilities for online programming, they recognized that emerging information technologies made it possible to work together in unprecedented ways. Given that there is no statewide governing authority for community colleges in Michigan, and that individual colleges have considerable autonomy, the decision to collaborate was entirely voluntary rather than imposed. Within this environment, planning for what eventually became the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative began in 1997, and almost two years were spent in identifying strategic goals for the collaborative and preparing a business plan. This plan involved adoption of

a variation of the "home college / provider college" model (with instruction delivered by the provider college and some support services provided by the home college).

The resulting strategic and business plan included a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which established a general framework for cooperation in the development and delivery of online courses and programs, the provision of professional development opportunities as well as provision of academic and student support services for online learners. This MOU would provide a stable and well-understood basis for subsequent collaboration and included the following:

- Home college responsibilities
- Provider college responsibilities
- Common tuition structure for online courses
- Tuition sharing between provider college and home college
- Articulation agreement
- Financial Aid agreement
- Guidelines for online programs of study

A staff taskforce, with representation from each Michigan community college was instrumental in developing the strategic plan and Memorandum of Understanding. The membership of the taskforce was not just distance learning specialists, but included expertise from instruction and student services. This staff taskforce continues to function as the MCCVLC Advisory Council and meets several times each year.

Perhaps the most unique feature of the Advisory Council is not the committee composition or responsibility, but the method of meeting. The Advisory Council meets three times a semester utilizing up to twelve interactive video sites throughout the state. While it initially took some time and effort to become effective in conducting meetings in this fashion, it's the only conceivable way to regularly bring these busy individuals together in a state as large as Michigan. If the Advisory Council were forced to rely on traditional, face-to-face meetings, both frequency and participation rates would doubtless suffer.

With the planning that had taken place and a MOU that clearly defines the relationships between and among the colleges, the MCCVLC began a pilot program in the summer of 1999. After completing a year of pilot operations, the MCCVLC is successfully completing a second year of full implementation. During these three years of operation, significant capacity to offer and support online courses has been developed: For the winter semester of 2002, over 500 courses (offered by 25 of the 28 Michigan community colleges) are listed in the online. Student interest in these courses is reflected in the enrollment trends – total enrollment in these courses was over 8300 in the fall of 2001, up from 4450 a year earlier in the fall of 2000.

MCCVLC Enrollment Trends

Summer 1999	**Summer 2000**	**Summer 2001**
Provider colleges: 12	Provider colleges: 14	Provider colleges: 17
Courses available: 47	Courses available: 100	Courses available: 174
Total VLC enrollments: 45	Total VLC Enrollments: 116	Total VLC enrollments: 182

Total enrollments: >700	Total enrollments: >1660	Total enrollments: >3280
Fall 1999	**Fall 2000**	**Fall 2001**
Provider colleges: 17	Provider colleges: 22	Provider colleges: 22
Courses available: 133	Courses available: 285	Courses available: 453
Total VLC enrollments: 60	Total VLC Enrollments: 212	Total VLC enrollments: 270
Total enrollments: >1800	Total enrollments: >4450	Total enrollments: >8300
Winter 2000	**Winter 2001**	**Winter 2002**
Provider colleges: 19	Provider colleges: 22	Provider colleges: 25
Courses available: 203	Courses available: 296	Courses available: >500
Total VLC enrollments: 147	Total VLC Enrollments: 212	Total VLC enrollments: N/A
Total enrollments: >3200	Total enrollments: >5200	Total enrollments: N/A

It is significant to note that while there are over 500 courses available from 25 provider colleges, they are all available from a single web site: http://www.mccvlc.org. Academic and student support services are available from that web site as well.

Collaborative Program Development

Collaborative programming has proved challenging, and though the MCCVLC is early in the collaborative development of programs and courses, the efforts seem to be well worthwhile. Given that a single college rarely has the resources to develop and offer the full complement of online courses for a program of study, collaborative programming is a

viable approach. The processes established by the MCCVLC are being used in the development of fifteen collaborative online programs and it is anticipated that other programs will follow. Collaborative online programming also makes it possible for a participating college to provide a program to its community without bearing the entire cost of program development.

In the case of program development, colleges are discovering that by utilizing the Articulation Agreement, they can recommend that students complete an equivalent course from another Michigan community college to fulfill a program requirement. In some cases where programs are being developed collaboratively, this sharing of courses within a program of study is actually planned; in other cases colleges will find an equivalent course in the online catalog that is already available from another college. Regardless of whether it's planned or not, the MCCVLC Memorandum of Understanding and Articulation Agreement make it possible for colleges to collaborate and share resources in the development of online programming.

Collaboratively Developed Programs

Program Title	**Lead College**	**Partner College**	**Partner College**	**Partner College**
Banking / Finance Certificate	Glen Oaks	West Shore		
Certification Preparation	Kellogg	Lansing	Schoolcraft	
Criminal Justice	Delta	West Shore	Northwestern	
Diagnostic Medical Sonography	Jackson	Kellogg	Mid-Michigan	

Early Childhood Education	North Central	Grand Rapids		
Network Administrator	Northwestern	Grand Rapids	Henry Ford	Oakland
Nursing – ADN	Northwestern	Jackson	Kellogg	St. Clair
Social Work Technician	Glen Oaks	Kellogg		
Web Administrator	Northwestern	Grand Rapids	Henry Ford	Oakland
AAS – Social Work	Glen Oaks	Kellogg		
Breast Imaging Certificate	Kellogg	Jackson		
Customer Energy Specialist	Jackson	Northwestern		
Health Insurance Coder/Biller	Glen Oaks	Jackson		
Technology Job Readiness	Kellogg	Schoolcraft		
LPN to RN Degree Program	Kirtland	Monroe	Kalamazoo Valley	

Critical to the success of program and course development, whether collaborative not, is the professional development of faculty and staff. For an individual college administration, it's often difficult to identify the appropriate training and make it available. The MCCVLC has been able to offer frequent, high quality professional development activities for all Michigan community colleges at per-college costs substantially below those the colleges would incur by providing similar training on their own. Well over 800 faculty, staff and administrators have participated in the collaborative professional development over the past year:

December 1999	Kellogg Grant Project Training	62 participants

January 2000	Collaborating for Connected Education	135 participants
February- April 2000	Mini-Session webcasts: LMS training	28 participants
May 2000	Distributed Learning Workshop	75 participants
May 2000	MCCVLC/ETOM Higgins Lake Retreat	65 participants
June 2000	Blackboard Administrator Training	17 participants
August 2000	Distributed Learning Workshop	45 participants
October 2000	Enrollment Administrators Workshop	39 participants
November 2000	Webmaster Workshop	49 participants
November 2000	MCCVLC Distributed Learning Workshop	52 participants
February 2001	Blackboard Administrators Workshop	26 participants
April 2001	Enrollment Administrators Workshop	50 participants
April 2001	Academic Systems Open	22 participants
April 2001	Blackboard Administrators	28 participants
May 2001	Webmaster Workshop	44 participants
May 2001	Distributed Learning Workshop	55 participants
May 2001	Blackboard 5 Update Workshop	11 participants
May 2001	Higgins Lake Retreat-D/L Quality	70 participants
August 2001	Distributed Learning Workshop	40 participants
August 2001	Using NETg Learning Objects	10 participants
November 2001	Distributed Learning Workshop	37 participants
November 2001	WIDS Handshake Workshop	30 participants

Collaborative Program Delivery

Colleges anticipate that the challenges of program delivery will also be eased by collaboration, such that each college may not find it necessary to offer every course within every program each semester. An equivalent course from another Michigan community college will serve the student just as well, as long there is no question about the transferability. Formal approval of the MCCVLC Memorandum of Understanding and Articulation Agreement ensure that if the course equivalency is listed in the online course catalog, that the course will, in fact, transfer.

Academic and Student Support Services

Offering courses and programs in an online environment involves not only the faculty and distance learning staff, but also almost every academic and student services function on a college campus. The challenges associated with providing academic and student support services for online learners vary greatly depending on the service in question, the particular student and the situation, but the challenges are often exacerbated by the fact that utilizing technology may not be the optimal solution in a case where technology is part of the underlying problem. Recognition that personal contact may be the optimal way to provide student services was a critical factor in Michigan community colleges developing a "provider college / home college" model for the MCCVLC. Examples of student services that may be more effectively provided by the home college are:

- Awarding of financial aid
- Test proctoring
- Access to and support for technology / computers

- Advising / counseling

The MCCVLC Guidelines for Online Programs (part of the MOU) are more specific in identifying the requirements for information and services to be made available online (or through the use of other common technologies) by the provider college, as well as the expectations of each college in the capacity of home college. The colleges have agreed that it is the responsibility of the provider college to provide the following for each program of study to be offered through the MCCVLC:

- Authoritative program information will be available online:
    - Requirements for program completion (including any activities that may not be completed online)
    - Program costs
    - Technology requirements
- Program advisement information
    - Name and title of program advisor(s)
    - E-mail address of program advisor(s)
    - Phone number of program advisor(s)
- Program admission requirements and procedures
- Access to required software, media and/or other course materials
- Financial aid for students enrolled in program
- Help desk for any program-specific technologies

Provider colleges are expected to make the above services directly available to students and prospective students since it is unreasonable to expect colleges without faculty and

staff with expertise in the program of study to be able to provide this support. It should be noted that while the home college may have the expertise in the area of financial aid to provide support to students, in many cases financial aid must be provided by the institution offering the program of study in which the student is enrolled – which is, of course, the provider college.

On the other hand, it is not unreasonable to expect that a student enrolled in an online program of study could access some services at the local, home college, albeit with some limitations. It may be most convenient for a student to use the home college library for research and resources, for example, but it is unreasonable to expect that the home college will have an equivalent collection to the provider college. The librarians at Michigan community colleges have agreed to provide inter-library loans at no cost to MCCVLC students as a partial remedy to this difficulty.

Students may benefit from other services at the home college as well – orientation (particularly orientation for distance learners), placement services, and help desk services. Clearly, the home college help desk will be able to provide only general assistance rather than help for program-specific technologies (which is included in the responsibilities of the provider college). The testing center directors at Michigan community colleges have spent considerable time and effort establishing protocols to be used for proctoring tests for MCCVLC students in an effort to make test proctoring a relatively convenient service at the home college.

It has been the experience of the MCCVLC over the past three years that student services for online learners are best developed and delivered, not by some specialized organization dedicated only to online learning, but rather by the professionals traditionally responsible for providing the services at each campus. These professionals have the most expertise in their respective areas, and generally find that with online learners most of the issues are very similar to those faced by traditional learners – the primary difference being the communication medium and techniques are changed.

Conclusions

Michigan community colleges have addressed the challenges of developing online programs by pooling their resources in a "provider college/home college model" and by using collaborative efforts to offer 15 complete online certificate or degree programs, and over 500 individual courses each semester through the Michigan Community College Virtual Learning Collaborative. The presidents of all 28 community colleges facilitated this achievement by agreeing to a Memorandum of Understanding and a Program Agreement document, a major accomplishment in a state that has no governing board for community colleges and where "local board authority" usually prevails. The total MCCVLC online enrollment in the fall of 2001 reached 8300, an 86.5 percent increase over the previous fall. Based on the MOU, student services are usually provided to online students by the student's home college.

Our future challenges include: (1) the development of a more streamlined transcript process, since there is no common course numbering system in Michigan, (2) implementing an assessment standard, which is especially challenging for general education programs, and (3) developing a process for updating collaboratively developed courses and programs. By pooling resources, through collaborative efforts, and with the structure provided by the MCCVLC, Michigan community colleges are meeting the challenges of online program development, program and course delivery, and student support services.

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